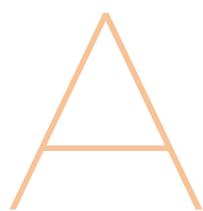


love, actually



Having a baby can have a big impact on your relationship – and your sex life. REBECCA WILLIAMSON reports on the toll that new parenthood can take and how to keep the love alive.



As magical a time as having a baby may be, there's nothing that can shake up a relationship quite like a newborn. Colloquially referred to as "baby quakes", this topsy-turvy time in your love life can be triggered by a combination of sleepless nights, difficulty adjusting to your new roles, and spending less one-on-one time together, which can eventually lead to a lack of intimacy.

For many couples, this phase is temporary and all you need to do is ride it out. Others, however, may need to make a conscious effort to nurture their relationship while nurturing their new baby too.

A University of Auckland family study found that more than seven per cent of relationships ended shortly after the birth of a baby, and the number of one-parent households doubled before the child was nine months old. Wellington mum Melissa* admits her marriage nearly became one of the statistics after the birth of her son.

"Our relationship and sex life was the absolute last thing on my mind for at least six months - I was exhausted and felt like I had nothing left to give anyone else after being constantly attached to our baby all day," she says. "How I felt about myself didn't help either - I've never felt so incredibly unattractive in my life! But Gareth* took it personally, and it really ruffled our marriage. He thought it was the beginning of a downwards spiral and we'd grow apart. I felt he just wasn't being very supportive or understanding."

After a difficult delivery in which she suffered third-degree tearing, Melissa was also terrified that their first sexual encounter would be painful and forever taint their sex life. That's a common fear, says midwife Pauline Hunter. She recommends waiting until at least six weeks after the birth before attempting sex, regardless of whether you had a vaginal delivery or a Caesarean.

"Waiting until you've stopped bleeding is the most important factor," she says. "When you're bleeding the placental site is still healing, so you don't want to risk introducing an infection. If you've had tearing or an episiotomy, this is usually repaired in about three weeks or so. Everything needs to be well healed for it to be comfortable for you."

Pauline advises using a lubricant, and making sure you are really relaxed before engaging in post-birth intercourse for the first time. If you feel pain, stop and try again in a week or so.

"If it hurts, it may be that it's too early and you're not ready," she says. "Sometimes you can have areas where you've had stitches that become super-sensitive; there's a cream that you can get from your GP to fix that."

If you're breastfeeding, it's natural to feel awkward about your breasts playing a sexual role now that they're nourishing your child, so if this is you, then talk to your partner about it beforehand. If your breasts are sore, a hot shower or nipple ointment may provide some relief. But don't fret if sex simply doesn't spin your wheels right now - the hormonal chaos swirling through your body means breastfeeding mums are more likely to have a slower return of their libido. One great thing →

TAKE NOTE

BRINGING SEXY BACK

- 1. TO AVOID THE RISK OF INFECTION, WAIT UNTIL YOU HAVE STOPPED BLEEDING AND ANY STITCHES HAVE HEALED BEFORE ATTEMPTING INTERCOURSE OR ORAL SEX.**
- 2. TIMING IS KEY - AT NIGHT YOU'RE BOUND TO FEEL EXHAUSTED, SO AIM FOR THE DAYTIME WHEN BABY NAPS.**
- 3. DO PELVIC FLOOR EXERCISES TO GET YOUR VAGINAL MUSCLES BACK TO THEIR PRE-PREGNANCY STATE - EVEN IF YOU'VE HAD A CAESAREAN.**
- 4. GIVE YOUR PARTNER A HEADS UP ABOUT WHAT YOU DO AND DON'T FANCY (RAW NIPPLES MAY BE A NO-GO ZONE!)**
- 5. TAKE IT SLOW AND CHOOSE POSITIONS THAT ALLOW YOU TO CONTROL THE DEPTH OF PENETRATION. IF YOU'VE HAD A CAESAREAN, AVOID POSITIONS THAT PUT PRESSURE ON YOUR STOMACH. ORGASM IS PERFECTLY SAFE.**
- 6. TAKE TIME TO WARM UP (PERHAPS WITH A MASSAGE) AND USE A LUBRICANT.**
- 7. USE CONTRACEPTION - YOU CAN STILL CONCEIVE WHILE BREASTFEEDING.**



you can do for your sex life right now, however, is to work those pelvic floor muscles.

“Your pelvic floor will be stretched and everything has changed slightly – but with pelvic floor exercises you can bring your body back to its pre-baby state. These should be done daily, as soon after birth as possible,” says Pauline. “If you improve your pelvic floor muscles, you can improve your sex life.”

But, as Melissa and Gareth discovered, it’s not just the physical aspects of a relationship that can go awry – the emotional side can be challenging for new parents too. Maternal mental health expert, Dr Natalie Flynn, says there are a few common difficulties that couples face: frustration at not being able to do the pre-baby activities that bonded you, changes in conversation topics (i.e. you used to talk about current affairs, now it’s whose turn it is to fold the washing) and shifts in power balance (if you’re no longer working, you may struggle with being financially dependent).

“All of this can add up to a sense of resentment for both exhausted parents, and a feeling that the other partner is not doing their fair share,” she says. “It’s a good idea to book a time to talk openly, and perhaps put things down on paper. It’s not uncommon for a new parent to be so burnt out with unforeseen duties that he or she does not register what new chores the other person has taken on, so sit down and make a list of what you do, and swap it with your partner. You may get a new respect for what each other is doing, and validation and appreciation are very important.”

Keeping those lines of communication open is crucial for maintaining intimacy, as is remembering that you are a loving couple, as well as a mum and dad. Intimacy doesn’t have to equal sex however, and there are other ways you can spark a close, emotional bond again.

“First, an understanding that your sexual relationship is going through a change needs to be brought into the open,” says Dr Flynn. “Some couples find it helpful to start their sex lives again with what we call a Sensate Focus, where the idea is not initially on intercourse or orgasm but enjoying the touch of the other’s body. You can also brainstorm ways to be intimate without sex, such as talking, massage, a date night and praising each other.”

‘Cuddle fatigue’ is extremely common with new mums in those first few months, says Dr Flynn. After tending to your baby’s needs day and night, showing physical affection for someone else can all of a sudden become arduous. The best way to overcome this is by carving some ‘me time’ into your day. “All mothers need – and should get – time alone without their baby or partner,” she says.

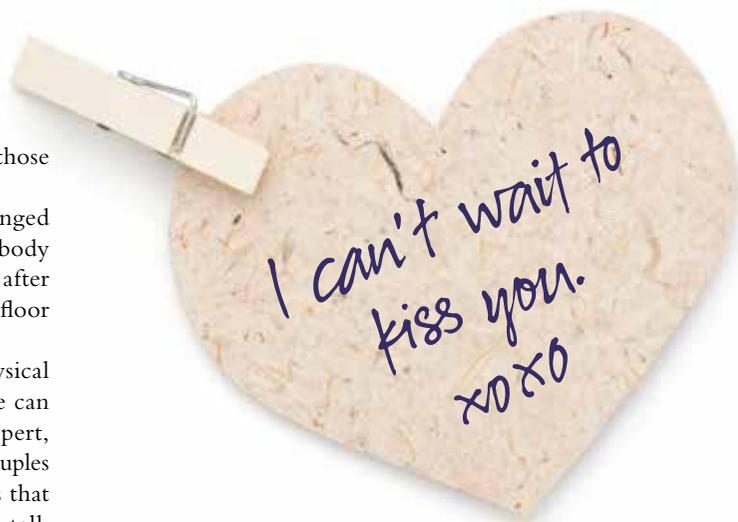
Ultimately, having a healthy balance between you, couple, baby and family time will lead to a happier family unit, and this applies to your partner too. Note that ‘balance’ is the operative word here – mums can harbour resentment if their partner goes out often while she’s at home with the baby, while fathers can feel left out or somewhat jealous if their partner only has eyes for their offspring.

“The most important factor in overcoming father jealousy is for him to have a relationship with the baby in his own right,” says Dr Flynn. “This means encouraging him to be involved in all aspects of baby care, such as soothing, dressing and bathing.”

She also recommends mums lose their ‘perfect’ expectations when it comes to baby and household tasks, and accepting ‘good enough’ when Dad contributes. Be comfortable asking him for help, but be careful not to criticise the outcome. Instead, opt for praise and thanks.

“Above all, know that it’s okay to consider your own interests,” she says. “Your child might be the most important person to you both but your relationship is important too, and retaining your identity as a couple will make you stronger parents.” ■

**Names have been changed.*



REIGNITING THE SPARK



- * Check in regularly with each other and be open about your feelings. “It’s important to speak in a way that’s not aggressive, even if it means taking a break in the conversation,” says Dr Flynn.
- * Schedule a date night. If that’s not possible, dress up and enjoy a candlelit dinner at home.
- * Make an effort to be ‘present’ when your partner gets home from work. This means putting your baby down, turning off your phones and listening to each other, even for just 15 minutes.
- * It’s important to still have ‘me time’ without your partner or baby, but the quantity needs to be reasonable for both of you.
- * Go for a walk together – those exercise endorphins may just lead to more physical activity.
- * Get your partner to give you a massage, focusing on erogenous points such as the nape of the neck and behind the knees.
- * Enjoy conversations that don’t revolve around your baby.
- * “Go back to doing some of the things you did when courting,” says Dr Flynn. “Even if you’re time-poor, chocolates can still be left under the pillow, texts sent and compliments made.”
- * Discard any negative feelings about your post-baby body. “Unfortunately, research shows an average peak in body dissatisfaction at six months post-partum,” she says. “The first thing to do is have self-compassion – you have a lot on at the moment so go easy on yourself.”
- * Splash out on some new underwear – sexy maternity bras are available these days!
- * Be prepared. If you used to argue over finances or your mother-in-law, these issues will increase tenfold when you’re parents, so have a plan for coping with them.
- * Don’t be afraid to seek professional help – having a baby is one of life’s most beautiful but challenging experiences.



